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Baldwin's Balls: Sensuality, Profanity, and the Testicular Fortitude to Reckon with Race

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ABSTRACT Both sensuality and profanity dwell within love's truthful self-expression. James Baldwin's oeuvre reads race relations in the United States, revealing a skewed balance between sensuality and profanity rectified through authentic sensual connections across racial lines. This essay introduces Baldwin's work as an exemplar of world reading, an ingredient of cultural literacy, to argue that sensuality prevents society from dismissing negative emotions as merely symptomatic of race or class resentment. Centering on profanity, the argument relies on how Baldwin deftly constructs sensuality as an inversive emotional balm for healing the US race problem through the feminine energeia found in his pervasive testicular discourse.

KEYWORDS Black feminism, Black studies, James Baldwin, cultural studies, gender, rhetoric

> "Music don't begin like a song," he said. "Forget all that bullshit you hear. Music can get to be a song, but it starts with a cry. That's all. It might be the cry of a newborn baby, or the sound of a hog being slaughtered, or a man when they put the knife to his balls. And that sound is everywhere. People spend their whole lives trying to drown out that sound."
> –James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*[1]

The United States has a race problem. At the dawn of the twentieth century, artists of the New Negro movement faced a challenging dual responsibility: to captivate white audiences without reinforcing racial clichés, and to assert Black American identity and life experiences without inciting racial tensions. While some

Black artists aligned their work to predominant expectations set largely by white patrons that narrative content center on themes such as “racial uplift,” “respectable” Blackness, or exoticized Black culture while avoiding more radical critiques of racism or depictions of Black life deemed “too raw” for white audiences, other artists tackled the issue of race by delving into its broader social aspects and highlighting its far-reaching implications.[2] James Baldwin’s oeuvre advances and extends those latter aims.

Baldwin constructs sensuality as life force: an innate eroticism driving profound connection, presence, and joy. Nevertheless, this same sensuality appears dually as constantly challenged and disrupted by profanity, expressed not merely in vulgar language, but as an embodied rejection of connection, an aggressive refusal against racial reconciliation. Baldwin engages profanity paradoxically; while it alienates and separates, it simultaneously serves as a powerful call to consciousness, insistently demanding recognition: “Hear me!” “Love me!” This dialectical interplay reveals profanity as both wound and remedy, simultaneously articulating alienation and longing, disgust and desire, fragmentation and reunion. Drawing from Audre Lorde’s concept of erotic power, I argue that Baldwin’s dialectic offers more than an opportunity for textual analysis: it provides an exemplar of the literacies of sensuality and profanity, embodied pedagogies built from emotional truths. These literacies unsettle the ideological structures sustaining racial alienation and ground sensuality as critical praxis toward meaningful racial solidarity and reconciliation.

On sensuality, in autobiographical style, Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* contends, “To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.”[3] He positions sensuality as an animating force, resonating with Lorde’s notion of the erotic as vital, creative energy. Yet Baldwin’s work simultaneously demonstrates how machinations of profanity disrupt and heighten erotic desire, pointing to a persistent dialectical tension. Profanity, in this sense, becomes a

complex mechanism: it may thwart and alienate Baldwin and his characters from sensuality, while also marking points of intense longing and genuine connection.

Sensuality knows no bounds; its limitless scope harbors contradictions and ambiguities, manifesting pleasure alongside tensions that reflect the intricate ironies of human connection. Profanity emerges as sensuality's counterforce and complement, sometimes antagonist, sometimes accomplice. Baldwin strategically deploys profanity to voice unresolved tensions and intense alienations that sensuality alone cannot address. His profanity at times represents unjust US American social and political systems; at other moments it interrupts complacency through active resistance. Nonetheless, profanity provokes urgent recognition across racial divides through raw, unfiltered confrontations and challenges to systemic injustices. Profanity may serve as a mechanism, a key, unlocking the door to sensuality.

Thus, sensuality carries confounding contradictions and ambiguities aimed at pleasure and satisfaction, pointing to perplexing ironies that illuminate critical provocations in Baldwin's work. These provocations confront and extend racial discourse while also addressing personal and intimate dimensions of human experience. Within his oeuvre dwells the sensual, the erotic, the profane, the abject, profanity at times alluding to the racially unjust outcomes of hegemonic white supremacy embedded within US American social relations (the opposite of the sensual), while at other times the profane connotes embrace, connection, and dignity (embodied in the sensual). Baldwin mobilizes ironies between sensuality and profanity, deploying sensuality as critique and corrective to racial alienation. Through its dialectical relationship with the profane, sensuality exposes the paradoxes of race relations: it points to and challenges the oppressive, unsustainable alienation enforced by racial divides, beckoning society toward refusal, pleasure, and ultimately, reconnection.

While critics such as Clarence Hardy and Christopher Hunt have found that Baldwin's treatment of the Black penis and testicles may reflect a problematic sexism, few specifically interrogate how Baldwin's rhetorical use of profanity shapes and sustains a dialectical tension between sensuality and racial alienation that advocates racial reckoning. Thus, this article's analysis draws from work by Sharon Holland, Robert Reid-Pharr, and Lorde to illuminate those tensions, and from Sianne Ngai's "ugly feelings" and Julia Kristeva's "abjections" to identify Baldwin's strategic deployment of profanity as more than disruptive or confrontational. It awakens audiences' desires, compelling readers to reckon with racialized identity, embodied ideologies, and social separation, stark realities rooted in the Black-white binary. Baldwin mobilizes profanity as critique and corrective, inviting collective efforts toward evolved self-awareness, authentic connection, and a heightened sense of community. Situating Baldwin's oeuvre within my broader project of Evolutionary Queer Literacy (EQL)—world reading, world traveling, world making pedagogical literacies—I contend that Baldwin's dialectic between profanity and sensuality provides a revolutionary framework for beginning to build community across racial divides. This paper thus aims to center "bonds of affection," echoing Abraham Lincoln's inaugural invocation, as aspirations central to Baldwin's narratives and urgently needed to strengthen national security and democracy by promoting and cultivating strong ties across differences in identity, social realities, and cultures.

Profanity and Sensuality: A World Reading Praxis

Positioning myself as the human lens—a Congolese, Guinean, Scots Irish, and Monacan Tribe descendant, Queer Black American cultural ecologist inhabiting a female body—I approach life as a very variegated adventure of testing to confirm or disconfirm social, economic, political, and cultural myths. Summarily, I

approach Baldwin's work through the lens of EQL. EQL, informed by a transdisciplinary frame that features critical pedagogy, Black and transnational feminism, and queer humanism, understanding cultural literacy as embodied and relational acts of "reading the world" (Freire),[4] world traveling (Maria Lugones),[5] and world making (Octavia Butler, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Ruha Benjamin)[6] critical literacies, where interoception, situated knowledge, situational awareness, and mutuality intersect, challenging dominant ideologies to engender positive cultural connections. Baldwin's work exemplifies critical cultural literacy enacted through bodies that navigate and narrate social boundaries, embodying and deploying myriad literacies beyond textuality, negotiating complex racial and gendered landscapes through visceral emotional truths.

Employing a triangular analytic prism, this analysis reinterprets Baldwin's sensuality and profanity through critical literacies of world reading, world traveling, and world making. Audre Lorde's concept of "the erotic" anchors the interpretive framework, conceptualizing sensuality as a transformative, embodied literacy rooted in affective and spiritual realms. In this sense, Lorde's eroticism provides a lens through which Baldwin's sensuality may be seen as a radical form of world reading, perceiving beneath oppressive surface realities to connect intimately with deeper truths of human experience. Conversely, Sianne Ngai's theorization of "ugly feelings" and Julia Kristeva's notion of "abjection" inform my approach to profanity, situating it as a literacy of profound emotional and social dislocation. Profanity, thus framed, becomes a language of world traveling, a disruptive articulation of alienation and racialized marginality. These affective vocabularies capture the tensions and ambivalences of navigating hostile sociocultural terrains.

Additionally, insights from Sharon Holland, Robert Reid-Pharr, and Sam Keen enrich this dialectical interplay, pointing to how erotic desire, intimacy, and communal bonds intersect with racialized disgust and alienation as Baldwin and his characters travel across and through worlds. Collectively, these perspectives

elucidate Baldwin's deliberate juxtaposition of sensuality and profanity as inversely related yet mutually constitutive cultural literacies. Sensuality emerges as an embodied literacy and erotic intervention against racialized estrangement, functioning as an intimate act of world making. Profanity, also an embodied literacy, simultaneously conveys authentic intimacy and interrupts feigned intimacy, animating tensions that engender critique and reconciliation.

Testicular Fortitude

In her sociopoetic essay, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde avers,

> The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plain, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant the suppression of the erotic as they considered source of power and information within our lives."[7]

The erotic exists as an innate reservoir within us, occupying a feminine and spiritual dimension anchored in our unrealized and often suppressed emotions. To sustain itself, oppression systematically contaminates or misrepresents these innate reserves, sources from which life-affirming energy flows. For women, dare I say for people, this distortion translates into the silencing and devaluation of erotic power as an essential channel of insight and empowerment.

Testicles and ovaries begin their journey as one, embryologically indistinct yet potent with the promise of becoming. Governed by genetic codes and hormonal commands, this primordial tissue transforms, manifesting externally as testicles or internally as ovaries, both organs intertwined with the powerful capacity to generate life, charged with sensuality and vulnerability alike. The descent of

testicles outside the body, their exposure and vulnerability, symbolizes the courage inherent in visibility, risk-taking, and openness, traits Baldwin metaphorically invokes as necessary for confronting uncomfortable truths about race and identity.

This transformation from undifferentiated gonads, potentially female, to testicles, a journey from internal safety to external exposure, parallels Baldwin's narrative use of "balls" as markers of courage and resilience. Whether US Americans decide to enact "testicular fortitude"—the audacity to expose ourselves to risk, discomfort, and vulnerability—we must begin to embrace the nakedness and honesty required for significant racial reckoning.

Much like Lorde's concept of erotic power emerges from suppressed feelings that oppression seeks to distort, so too does testicular fortitude represent a reclamation and resurgence of an erotic, life-sustaining energy previously constrained by oppressive norms around masculinity. Erotic power, therefore, is not solely confined to the feminine domain Lorde articulates but extends metaphorically into the masculine realm, with testicular fortitude embodying an audacious embrace of vulnerability, sensuality, and strength as essential forces for social transformation and personal empowerment. As Baldwin's work reminds readers, true resilience and fortitude lie not in armor or concealment but in willingly descending into vulnerability, risking exposure, and confronting the profound truths of social intimacy, sensuality, and communal creation.

In "The Discovery of What It Means to Be American" Baldwin asserts, "In Europe, a Black writer can drop the façade of regularity and be themselves," suggesting that Black folks in the US endure the disquieting elusiveness of truth—true self-awareness, self-expression, and self-determination—a disconnection from erotic power.[8] Lorde suggests that power manifests in numerous forms, "used and unused," recognized and unnoticed, nudging us to tap into primal energies embodied in the erotic, sensual, loving power too often suppressed.[9] In *The*

Passionate Life, Keen centers a "nonreproductive ordering" (Holland 59–60) of relationships, which points to love and intimacy as embodied truth known and measured by feeling within the private, unobservable, intimate spaces of platonic relations.[10] The presence and depth of genuine relationships bound across racial lines, reproductive and nonreproductive, anchored in sensuality functions as a barometer that measures the shifting pressures and intensities in human emotions and connections. For Baldwin, the seat of truth, sensual connection with self and others exists s within the testicles, rooted in Lorde's feminine agency of sensuality.

The tendency to sexualize Black physicality, a tendency which maintains racial segregation and inequality, may be understood as encounters with the erotic distorted into racialized disgust. Ngai offers an "aesthetics of negative emotions" from which to interpret Baldwin's "very effort of thinking the aesthetic and political together—a task whose urgency seems to increase in proportion to its difficulty in an increasingly anti-utopian and functionally differentiated society—[as] a prime occasion for ugly feelings."[11] Baldwin explores the self-alienation of racial strife and segregation as profane, illustrated through characters that feel impotent or dysgenic particularly considering our inequitable US democracy. Ugly feelings include anxiety, fear, and disgust: sensuality's emotional antithesis, carefully crafted throughout Baldwin's work.

Connected to Lorde and Keen's nods toward sensuality, Reid-Pharr's "Alas Poor Jimmy," in *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual*, critically examines Baldwin's final novel *Just Above My Head*. Pharr suggests that in works such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, *Another Country*, and essays like "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin illumes how struggles, victories, and defeats within any community reflect the broader challenges that individuals encounter in their quest for "community, intimacy, and love."[12] Pharr summarizes Baldwin's work, contending, "Erotic choice often operates, in fact, as a means to reposition oneself in society," reminding readers

“of Baldwin’s tortured character, David, in *Giovanni’s Room* as he struggles with the erotic and social implications of choosing either ‘the white woman,’ Hella, or ‘the colored man,’ Giovanni.”[13] The opportunity to shift and renegotiate social positionality and ugly feelings becomes possible through our erotic choices.

One example of renegotiating ugly feelings associated with social positionality presents in Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man,” which connects sentimentalism, preferred by the Black literary community of Baldwin’s time,[14]

> He began to feel a joy he had never felt before. He watched the hanging, gleaming body, the most beautiful and terrible object he had ever seen till then. . . . The man with the knife took the privates in his hand, one hand, still smiling as though he were weighing them. And the cradle of the one white hand, the nigger’s privates seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales; but seemed heavier, too, much heavier, and Jesse felt his scrotum tighten; and a huge, huge, much bigger than his father’s, flaccid, hairless, the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest. The white hand stretched then, cradled them, caressed them. . . . Then Jesse screamed, and the crowd screamed as the knife flashed, first up, then down, cutting the dreadful thing away, and the blood came running down. Then the crowd rushed forward, tearing at the body with their hands, with knives, with rocks, with stones, howling and cursing.[15]

The passage above depicts Jesse’s first encounter with lynching and his visceral response. The white man’s hand (a participant) is described as “cradling” the Black man’s genitals, centering the sexual violence and dehumanization involved in the act. Baldwin’s narrative hints at adult Jesse’s sense of guilt, expressed as his trepidation throughout the narrative, which takes readers recursively through Jesse’s adult life and childhood. Baldwin’s world-travelling technique gives readers a sense of Jesse’s ideological interpellation from an innocent white boy who played with a Black friend in childhood into a white supremacist, socially sanctioned to inflict racialized brutality. Jesse’s white supremacist interpellation prevents him from maintaining a friendship with his Black friend.

Relatedly, Keen contends that the erotic recognizes love as a central premise for truly understanding human existence. We must base philosophical debates on love, arguing from a place already grounded in love.[16] Developing this idea further, he connects the human psyche, as a portal through which existential truths emerge, to our self-awareness as beings driven by the desire to love and connect.[17] To exemplify his loving stance, Keen invokes childhood experiences of eros: "A child may be more loving, more motivated by eros, more open than an adult. Our journey may be a matter of finding ways to return to what we once knew and have forgotten. In the platonic addition, eros is a remembering, or recollection, of the self, and effort (as Zen also says) to discover the face we had before we were born."[18] A child's natural state involves a greater sense of eros-motivated love; children embody sensuality's most unguarded and receptive form. Adults, Keen implies, suffer from an amnesia that often causes them to lose the connection between intuition and sensual openness.

Jesse supplants childhood guilt with racialized disgust. Sianne Ngai constructs disgust as an emotion that simultaneously encompasses and assaults the contrast between itself and desire, which obliterates "aesthetic satisfaction" and the "disinterestedness" upon which this satisfaction relies.[19] Disgust alters how we perceive and engage with art, beauty, and emotionally charged experiences. Ngai suggests that literary and cultural theorists ignore analyzing disgust in favor of desire. A reason for the imbalanced focus on desire and disgust might involve the political right's historical tendency to overtly use disgust to strengthen divisions between the self and those viewed as "contaminating" others, thereby perpetuating racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and misogyny.[20]

An example of racialized disgust propels the fictional narrative in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Baldwin's narrator, Tish, describes Daniel's telling of his experience in a paddy wagon with a drunken white man who "vomited all over himself," stinking, and singing. Daniel's anecdote highlights how Baldwin connects emotional excitement to the groin region: "But the mothers who put him in this wagon, man,

they was coming in their pants while they did it. I don't believe there's a white man in this country, baby, who can even get his dick hard without he hear some nigger moan."[21] While Daniel feels repulsed by the drunken white man's noisome noisiness, his repulsion, aimed at the man, lacks the harmful ire inscribed in disgust. Regarding the white drunkard, Daniel's tone more closely resembles pity until it turns to racialized disgust as his attention moves from the drunkard to the police, the white men in charge. His disgust then indicts white American men, their impotency, perversion, and social indifference toward Black men.

Daniel confronts an erotic choice. Erotic choice comprises a tenet of queer theory. Blending critical race theory and queer theory in *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Holland confronts queer sensuality as an erotic choice, aligning well with Pharr's position that Baldwin's work points to how community victories and defeats mirror individual challenges encountered in the quest for "community, intimacy, and love." Holland's stance also connects with Lorde's and Keen's thoughts on the erotic as integral to human sensuality. Holland considers the erotic and the challenges inhered in forming true community to critique the human capacity to forge genuine connections. The erotic, in Holland's view, exposes the limitations of interpersonal relationships and underscores subjectivity and its interdependent nature. She suggests that subjecthood or possessing a sense of self is less about an autonomous self-conception based on individual actions and more about our relationships with others, implying that our very humanity intertwines with and exists defined by relational connections.[22] Baldwin's character Daniel exemplifies this relational conception of subjecthood in his interactions with the drunkard and the police, juxtaposing sensuality—manifested as "stinking and singing"—against the profanity and racial disgust characterized by the officers "coming in their pants while they did it." Daniel's experience embodies Baldwin's inversive technique, while demonstrating Holland's concept that we perceive, define, and enact our humanity through our relationships with others, sensual and profane.

Profanity has a place in resistance. Baldwin's language, "I don't believe there's a white man in this country, baby, who can even get his dick hard without he hear some nigger moan," may be interpreted as a curse, a curse of resistance able to momentarily invert the usual power dynamics, allowing oppressed people to voice frustration, pain, anger, and or defiance against the oppressor. The white phallus connotes sexual violence and oppression in decolonial contexts, which points to white dominance parasitizing Black life to affirm itself. Thus, the line reveals the erotic as a site of both exposure and dependency, where vulnerability cannot be contained, inverting the racial-sexual power dynamic, to suggest that white male arousal, symbolically, their claim to virility and dominance exists not independently but dependent on Black suffering. Moreover, the "moan" becomes a sonic trigger, erotic and violent, pointing to white identity and sexual power as contingent upon Black degradation. Baldwin symbolizes the physical and sexual abuse commonly used by colonizers and slave owners to oppress Black people. This moment of profane refusal, a linguistic curse that unmasks the underlying sickness of a society structured by white supremacy, strips away euphemism and politeness; it forces confrontation. Profanity also challenges taboos and authority, while cultivating a collective identity that constitutes solidarity. It may serve as a galvanizing rally cry, articulate terms for justice, or conversely, imagine plans for revenge.

This moment functions as a pedagogy. It demands a literacy able to hold contradiction, the white man's erection is not about love or joy, but violence disguised as desire, sadistic pleasure born from domination. Baldwin shows us how the erotic becomes a battleground. In Daniel's case, profanity stands as subject resistance impelled by frustration and anger tinged with racialized disgust. The "moan" stands in for everything Baldwin names as erotic and profane: a sound that refuses to be assimilated, a voice that must be heard, a shared human vulnerability that neither power nor denial can silence.

In this resistance, racialized disgust runs both Black and white, sensual and profane. For instance, in *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin condemns white America through a letter to his nephew, writing, "This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish."[23] The idea that white identity, and the sense of security it seems to endow those who wear its skin, lives rooted in the degradation and suffering of others, in this case, people who wear darker brown skins, harkens back to the notion that the racialized disgust experienced by white Americans requires the exclusion, denigration, and death of Black Americans, which undoubtedly fuels Baldwin's disgust and struggle against white hegemony.

Keen's notion of love obviates the need for resistance. His love aligns with the notion of the erotic as a deeply felt and fundamentally life-affirming force. Keen suggests that "healing" constitutes love's primary purpose, driven by a call to recognize ourselves and our touchpoints: "To love is to be about the task of healing. The lover's vocation is to lure others (and that part of the self that nurses old injuries and fears, takes pride in autonomy, and harbors the illusion of self-sufficiency) into recognition of their true being and their true allegiance. It is to practice the art of forgiveness and to expand the circle of care. Love's way is always vulnerable because it abandons the rules of power-politics and the paranoid game upon which the social consensus is based."[24] This notion links with Lorde's thought on the erotic's power to reveal our most genuine and deeply rooted capacities for feeling and action. In this context, love—and by extension, the erotic—becomes a life-transforming force able to challenge social and political norms that underpin resistance to building shared community.

Connectedly, Baldwin and a few of his characters embody Keen's healing type of love secreted within their profanity. Invoking testicular fortitude, the fictive Leo Proudhammer, in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, seethes racialized disgust. Leo responds to the degradation inflicted on his brother Caleb while unjustly imprisoned and brutalized by white correction officers:

> Never. Never. Never. I would find some way to make them pay. I would do something one day to at least one bland, stupid, happy white face which would change that face forever. If they thought that Caleb was black, and if they thought that I was black, I would show them, yes, I would, one day, exactly what blackness was! I swore it. I swore it. I whispered it to Caleb's kinky hair. I cursed God from the bottom of my heart, the very bottom of my balls.[25]

Leo expresses a desire to retaliate or seek vengeance and a desire for transformation. His racialized disgust toward white men, law enforcement officers particularly, embedded in traditional power dynamics he recognizes but feels powerless to change, encapsulates frustration, anger, and determination born from racism's dehumanizing results.

Consider this: Keen explicates eros in "The Erotic Crisis," offering insights into the term's Greek etymology, focused on its foundational role in human and natural realms. Keen shares that Greek philosophers regarded eros as the "prime mover," an elemental force driving all entities toward their ultimate fulfillment. This impulse extends human desires into the natural world, illustrating, for instance, how an acorn driven by eros transforms into an oak. A universal striving underscores eros as integral to realizing the inherent potential within all life forms, reflecting a deep connection between eros and the latent power present in nature.[26]

In Leo, Baldwin's erotic impulse arises with a curse from Leo's deepest, most primal self, "the very bottom of my balls," which suggests he draws from an emotional and physical depth, a place associated with strength, virility, and core identity. The curse speaks to the interplay between desire, fear, and revulsion that characterizes white Americans' perception of Blackness and Black masculinity, with the "balls" serving as a symbol of what is alternatively desired and feared, yet kept at a distance, segregated and unaccepted, both white and Black kept from ultimate fulfillment.

The racial separation evoked by disgust—contempt, repulsion, exclusion, denigration—connects to Kristeva's ruminations on the abject. Abjectness suggests that "there are lives not sustained by desire, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on exclusion."[27] Outside nature's embrace, some souls wander outside desire, outside the sensual, drawn toward and drowning in materialistic depths.

For Baldwin's characters, abjectness emerges as a visceral response to guilt and disgust-driven denigration. For example, in *Beale Street*, the narrator's father, Joseph, falls into an abjectness that distances him from white men and pulls him away from his family and social circle. Trying to rouse a despondent Frank from capitalist despair, Joseph empathizes,

> That white man, baby, and may his balls shrivel and his asshole rot, he want you to be worried about the money. That's his whole game. But if we got to where we are without money, we can get further. I ain't worried about their money—they ain't got no right to it anyhow, they stole it from us—they ain't never met nobody they didn't lie to and steal from.[28]

Frank feels an abjectness that eventually ends his life, while Joseph responds from a well of empathy linked to emotional connection: testicles. Frank's despondence about money (and more) "looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable."[29] Joseph's counsel, however, leans more toward the human connection inhered in sensuality because abjection "lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced."[30] Joseph's dignified self-reliance, antithetical to abjectness, invokes sensual energy.

In the passage above, Baldwin triggers Joseph's memory through a form of anamnesis, as Keen explains, a "remembering" or recollection of the self's original state. This Platonic philosophy parallels Zen teachings about rediscovering one's

“original face” before birth, symbolizing a return to an intrinsic, unconditioned state. These perspectives suggest that true sensuality and self-understanding lie in recovering what is already known to the soul yet obscured by adult life.

Joseph invokes the imagery of “balls” as an embodied act of remembrance, grounding himself in the eternal sensual energy held within his own body to counter Frank’s overwhelming abjectness. Though Frank was not the most likable man, his visible emotional crisis stirs a bodily recognition in Joseph, an impulse to lift a brother up, compelling a response rooted in sensuality. The pointed curse —“may his balls shrivel and his asshole rot”—signal intense anger and a yearning for retribution, representing a vocal resistance against injustice and exploitation. Directly targeting the oppressor’s body, the curse symbolically reclaims a measure of agency and power in a context where the Black male character experiences economic marginalization and emasculation.

Although Black masculinity has been historically fetishized and demonized, invoking “balls” may represent the reclamation or remembering of one’s core identity, one’s sensuality, as transition from vulnerability to strength or defiance. I revisit *Beale Street* to observe Black artist, husband and perpetually jailed Fonny as he reconciles with his chosen vocation. Conversing with his pregnant wife Tish, Fonny explains: “Now. I’m an artisan. . . . Like a cat who makes—tables. I don’t like the word artist. Maybe I never did. I sure the fuck don’t know what it means. I’m a cat who works from his balls, with his hands. I know what it’s about now. I think I really do. Even if I go under. But I don’t think I will. Now.”[31]

The phrase “I’m a cat who works from his balls” encapsulates a bold assertion of deriving strength and guidance from a deeply instinctual, primal source. For Fonny, “balls” signify more than a physical attribute; the term speaks to a raw emotional power, courage, and authenticity. To “work from his balls” then implies that Fonny operates from a place of unfiltered truth and visceral emotion, which aligns with the erotic as conceptualized by Baldwin, Lorde, Keen, Reid Pharr, and

Holland—more than the sexual sense, a profound, life-affirming energy that encompasses passion, creativity, and intuition. The erotic, the sensual, suggests a fiercely honest and unapologetically direct way of being and creating that is deeply attuned to our innate desires and feelings.

Holland and Pharr's discourse on erotic choice and community resonates with Keen's insight that "there is no I without a thou. Individuality is created by relationship. Love is a relationship that creates its own terms. This means that the evidence that the universe harbors some kindly intent toward the individual can be collected and evaluated only within the courtroom of the individual's most intimate relationships."[32] Keen, Pharr, Holland, and Lorde support Baldwin's existential notion that our interactions shape self-perception, with the erotic as a reflection and component of what being human and in community means.

The Sensual Profanity in "Balls"

Baldwin has deep connection to "balls" and seems to intimate that everyone begins life with a pair. Yet, the vernacular connotes profanity. In addition to relieving stress, using profanity can help those who feel powerless reclaim a semblance of agency. Profanity as resistance assists Black male character development and aids our understanding of their social positions, frustrations, pains, and outrage. White Americans voyeuristically experience Black male anger from the relative safety of profanity—avoidance, objectification, fear—distanced from the formidable physicality that could incite violence. Baldwin and his characters employ profanity as political defiance against the oppressor, a refusal to be dehumanized, a call to collective identity and behavior as aggressive, dismissive, or disrespectful actions that undermine trust and community building.

In Baldwin's oeuvre, "balls" emerge as a metaphor for creative and existential bravery, where Baldwin and his male characters tap into the core, often most

powerful feminine aspects of their being and, yet the most vulnerable. In this view, the testicles, symbolizing the erotic and generative power, represent a wellspring of emotional and sensual energy that drives personal identity, agency, and connection. Exposing the most vulnerable, tender parts of male anatomy for public scrutiny elevates testicles as the seat of emotional power and the erotic for Baldwin, a place where, as Lorde opines, the sensual offers an opening for "recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives," which "can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama."[33] A person's character may be measured by their testicular fortitude.

A Profanity of Refusal

Together, Lorde, Keen, Pharr, Holland, Ngai, and Kristeva imply that our feelings comprise the benchmark for measuring racial reconciliation, observed privately and publicly by the presence and prevalence of genuine relationships: intimacy rooted in mutual respect, understanding, and affection across racial lines. Should we choose to build community and reconcile race, we will know these relationships by their freedom from profanity—by their sensual connection—by their ability to flourish in authentic, shared experiences.

I draw from Lorde to operationalize sensuality thusly: "Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society."[34] The erotic, then, holds transformative power. More than sexuality or sex, the erotic lends to the sensual, which constitutes life-affirming energy. People may create genuine social change by tapping into this power, moving beyond superficial reforms to address deeply rooted systemic issues.

Connecting to sensuality affirms identity and creativity in contrast to racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic social constructs. To embrace sensuality means embracing personhood as an act of resistance and activism against oppressive structures.

Baldwin's work includes a specter of profanity beyond language, a profanity impeding our ability to form genuine relationships, particularly those that require deep intimacy grounded by mutual respect across racial lines. Profane behavior often manifests as actions that are aggressive, dismissive, or disrespectful toward others' identities, experiences, or feelings. Such behaviors can severely undermine the trust and respect needed to build intimacy, making it difficult to achieve closeness and experience empathy, especially across racial divides already under strain due to systemic biases and historical injustices. A profanity of refusal haunts Baldwin's work, an unwillingness to connect that I describe as deliberate and obstinate behaviors where a person or community chooses not to engage, empathize, or acknowledge others' perspectives, emotions, or rights. This behavior goes beyond avoidance to intentionally disengage from the efforts necessary to build meaningful relationships, particularly in contexts where those connections might cultivate greater social cohesion, understanding, and progress. A profanity of refusal denotes the refusal to connect, an active choice to remain isolated within one's beliefs and experiences, which harms relationships and creates a hostile environment where people feel unsafe to express their feelings or share their experiences.

Hence, a profanity that corrupts or distorts erotic energy shows up as white oppression in Baldwin's work. A sociopathy that perverts erotic energy inheres in white supremacist ecologies and operates rhetorically in his narratives. It manifests in numerous ways, suppressing authentic desires, imposing harmful stereotypes, or exploiting and manipulating intimate relationships, all serving as metaphors for or examples of the broader dynamics of racial oppression. For instance, in the short story "This Morning, This Evening So Soon," Baldwin

illuminates white sociopathy. The protagonist-actor draws from the fear and anxiety experienced in white social spaces to posit a rhetorical question: “How can one be prepared for the spittle in the face, all the tireless ingenuity which goes into the spite and fear of small, unutterably miserable people, whose greatest terror is the singular identity, whose joy, whose safety, is entirely dependent upon the humiliation and anguish of others?”[35] The actor’s invocation of being spat upon lends visceral energeia to the experience of American Blacks in white America. Moreover, the notion of a people “whose joy, whose safety, is entirely dependent upon the humiliation and anguish of others” feels beyond profane, classic sociopathic behavior.

Even considering such profanity, Baldwin’s impulse toward sensuality invites estranged Americans who identify as Black and white to (re)cross the settler colonialist hinterland and return to the untamed wilderness of spiritual connection where self-alienation may reconcile with community. Reconnection is accomplished through self-awareness, self-determination, and honest relationships, connection imbued by the sensual, seared by flames of personal and political truth.

Sensual Profanity, A Force for Change

To US Americans who identify as Black, Baldwin opines, “We cannot be free until they are free”[36]—everybody. Western culture relies heavily on masculine energy, denying the human yearning for life-affirming emotional connection. Mislabeling masculine energy and our emotional needs and their expressions leads to a warped understanding of the erotic, manifesting in forms like pornography and obscenity, essentially perverting our deepest feelings.[37] Moreover, when we ignore the role of the erotic in cultivating and sustaining our power, our fortitude and resilience, we disregard and disconnect our own bodies and spirits from our intellects. Eliding our erotic desires for one another, we treat each other as mere

tools for gratification. In doing so, we cancel opportunities to genuinely revel in satisfying acts and interactions based on our shared traits and unique differences.[38] Maria Lugones, in her 1987 essay "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception" contends that we fail to visit one another's worlds.[39]

The erotic resides in a distinctly spiritual realm, anchored in the strength of ancient wisdom and personal truths typically either unexpressed or unacknowledged. For oppression to sustain itself, it must taint or warp those divine inner fountains of power in the oppressed culture, which are essential for driving life-affirming transformation.[40] To effectively harness our erotic sensibilities, we must first acknowledge their existence.

Baldwin reflects on a school principal in the Southern US, musing:

> But I could not avoid wondering if he had ever really looked at a Negro and wondered about the life, the aspirations, the universal humanity hidden behind the dark skin. As I wondered, when he told me that race relations in this city were excellent and had not been strained by recent developments, how on earth he managed to hold on to his delusion.[41]

Here, Baldwin implores white Americans, represented by this principal, to connect with Black students and Black people more broadly in ways that are more truthful, more human, and more sensual and authentic. His call is more than an appeal to tolerance; it's a demand for an intimate literacy, an embodied literacy, that reaches beyond surface interactions and into the uncomfortable, sensuous truth of human connection, thus dismantling the delusions that sustain racism.

Baldwin also points out that political apathy perpetuates the US's divisions: "I sometimes think, with despair, that Americans will swallow whole any political speech whatever—we've been doing very little else, these last, bad years."[42] Baldwin's despair at the American tendency to unquestioningly digest any form of political speech points to a social abjection, an uncritical and profane acceptance that signifies a collective detachment from a genuine, active desire for truth or

understanding, lives removed from desire. Bear in mind that "there are lives not sustained by desire, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on exclusion."[43]

Numerous Baldwin characters find themselves exiled between sensuality and profanity's liminal boundaries, and his reflections on US societal tendencies regarding political speech, racialized disgust, and a detachment from genuine desire that yearns for human connection exemplify abject profanity as a force rescued by sensuality: "Perhaps we [are], all of us—pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children—bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run; if so, within these limits we sometimes achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love."[44] A passive consumption, an exclusion from actively pursuing deeper, more meaningful relationships or political discourse, mirrors an abject state of being, an ontology outside the realm of authentic desire and engagement. Sensuality can set America free!

Through sensuality and profanity, Lorde, Kristeva, and Ngai nurture a relational kaleidoscope through which to observe cultural literacy enacted through Baldwinian truths. Connected to our sensuality, we "become less willing to accept powerlessness" or any other artificial "supplied states of being . . . such as resignation, despair, self- effacement, depression, self-denial."[45] Sensuality, our prime mover, prevents us from dismissing negative emotions as mere reflections of race and class-based resentment. By centering profanity, Baldwin, the "incorrigible maverick,"[46] deftly blends sensuality and profanity as provocative literacies for healing US racism, literacies grounded in the feminine energeia located in Baldwin's balls.

Reflecting on this essay's epigraph, Baldwin's assertion that music originates not as melody but as a primal cry, a raw, visceral response to pain, loss, or profound transformation, we grasp the essence of his broader critique. Like music, the

struggle against racial injustice begins not in polished rhetoric but in an embodied, instinctive outcry for recognition and liberation. Baldwin compels us to confront the cries society relentlessly attempts to silence, reminding us that beneath each refined narrative, every comfortable illusion, lies a persistent and unsettling truth: human anguish demands to be heard. To move beyond our racial and social divides, we must stop drowning out these voices with political chaos and instead acutely attune ourselves to their rhythms. Only then may we transform these primal, often agonizing cries into songs of connection, humanity, and eventually harmony, an exemplar of critical cultural literacy.

Notes

1. James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head* (Dell Publishing, 1978), 92–3. ↩
2. Aaron Ngozi Oforlea, *James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and the Rhetorics of Black Male Subjectivity* (Ohio State University Press, 2017), 97, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvzcz5c6.7 < https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvzcz5c6.7> . ↩
3. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (Vintage International, 1962). 43. ↩
4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Bloomsbury Academic, 1992), 82; Paulo Freire and Donaldo P. Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1987), 29, 35; Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*, (Westview Press, 1998), xiv–xv, 31. ↩
5. Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception" in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*, (Feminist Constructions, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 77–100. ↩
6. Octavia E. Butler, *Wild Seed*. (Grand Central Publishing, 2020); Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After the End of the World* (Duke University Press, 2018); and Ruha Benjamin, *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want* (Princeton University Press, 2022). ↩
7. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984), 53. ↩
8. James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be American," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985* (Beacon Press, 2021), 173. ↩
9. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 53. ↩

10. Sam Keen, *The Passionate Life: Stages of Loving* (Harper San Francisco, 1992), 243. ↩

11. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 1, 3. ↩

12. Robert Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual* (New York University Press, 2007), 99. ↩

13. Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go*, 110. ↩

14. Lawrence A Davis, "James Baldwin: Mimic & Mastery," paper presented at Women's and Gender Studies, Claremont Graduate University, 2023.) to modernism as Baldwin's focus shifts from private to public spaces. The emotionally evocative short story holds a moral lesson driven by the antagonist's guilt and desire for human connection. Jesse, a "white man," is "caught in a nightmare, a nightmare dreamed by a child" and has "been subtly and hideously displaced" by confrontations with blackness felt within his balls:[12. James Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" (Vintage International, 1965), 234. ↩

15. Baldwin, *Going*, 247–48. ↩

16. Keen, *Passionate Life*, 25. ↩

17. Keen, *Passionate Life*, 27. ↩

18. Keen, *Passionate Life*, 31. ↩

19. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 335. ↩

20. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 338–39. ↩

21. James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (Vintage International, 1974), 108. ↩

22. Sharon Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Duke University Press, 2012), 47, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822395157 < https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822395157> . ↩

23. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage International, 1962), 7. ↩

24. Keen, Sam. *The Passionate Life: Stages of Loving*. 191. ↩

25. James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (Vintage International, 1998), 210. ↩

26. Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long*, 210. ↩

27. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 2010), 6. ↩

28. Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, 125. ↩

29. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1. ↩

30. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1. ↩
31. Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, 193. ↩
32. Keen, *The Passionate Life*, 244. ↩
33. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 58. ↩
34. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 59. ↩
35. James Baldwin, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," in *Going to Meet the Man*, 172. ↩
36. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 10. ↩
37. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 58–59. ↩
38. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 53. ↩
39. Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 77–100. ↩
40. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 53. ↩
41. James Baldwin, "A Fly in the Buttermilk," in *The Price of the Ticket*, 168. ↩
42. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 49. ↩
43. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 6. ↩
44. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 41. ↩
45. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 58. ↩
46. James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be American," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 183. ↩

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